



• The Road to Reopening: *Winter Holiday* Guidance



Guidelines and tips for safe holiday celebrations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

The holiday season is in full swing. The normal hustle and bustle of the season can be stressful enough. Trying to hustle and bustle during a pandemic can be even more stressful. Columbia/Boone County Public Health and Human Services (PHHS) has put together some guidance to help you make your holiday plans as safe as possible.

The intent of this document is to provide guidance for common activities surrounding the holidays after Thanksgiving through New Years, such as traveling, holiday parties, and gift exchanges. Events and activities can be made as safe as possible by staying COVID Aware, but there is always risk involved when people gather. We know people are tired of the pandemic, but taking public health measures this holiday season will protect our family and friends, and move us all towards a return to normal.

As always, if you're feeling sick, have recently tested positive for COVID-19, or have been identified as a close contact, stay home and don't travel or have guests.

See the [CDC's Holiday Celebrations page](#) for additional guidance on gathering during winter holidays. If you would like further guidance for a holiday event that is not covered in this document, please email coronavirus@como.gov.

Risk Levels

Below are some things to take into consideration, according to the CDC.

Celebrating virtually or with members of your own household poses a low risk for spread. In-person gatherings pose varying levels of risk. If you are organizing or attending an event, the size of the event and the mitigation strategies being used — as outlined in the [Considerations for Events and Gatherings](#) — will give you a sense of the risk involved. There are several factors that contribute to the risk of getting infected or infecting others with the virus that causes COVID-19 at a holiday celebration. In combination, these factors will create various amounts of risk, so it is important to consider them individually and together:

- **Does it matter where my gathering is held?** – Because case rates are high across the country, the risk of infection is also high in every location. Family and friends should consider the number of COVID-19 cases in their community and in the community where they plan to celebrate when considering whether to host or attend a holiday celebration. Information on the number of cases in an area can be found on the [area's health department website](#).
- **Where is it most safe to gather, indoor or outdoor?** – Outdoor gatherings are generally less risky than indoor gatherings. A well-ventilated indoor space, such as one with open windows and doors, slightly lowers the risk of gathering in an indoor space. Gathering in poorly ventilated indoor spaces carries the highest risk.
- **Does a longer gathering increase risk of exposure?** – The less time spent in contact with people outside of your household, the less risk is involved. Conversely, longer gatherings pose more risk.
- **Does the size of my gathering change the risk involved?** – The fewer people in attendance, the lower the risk. Gatherings with more people pose more risk than gatherings with fewer people. The CDC does not have a limit or recommend a specific number of attendees for gatherings. The size of a holiday gathering should be determined based on the ability to reduce or limit contact between attendees, the risk of spread between attendees, and [state, local, territorial, or tribal health](#) and safety laws, rules, and regulations.
- **Can I invite friends and family from different places to my gathering?** – Gatherings with attendees who are traveling from different places pose a higher risk than gatherings with attendees who live in the same area. Higher levels of COVID-19 cases and community spread in the gathering location, or where attendees are coming from, increase the risk of infection and spread among attendees.
- **Do we need to take preventive measures to be safe?** – Gatherings with more preventive measures — like mask wearing, social distancing, and hand washing — pose less risk than gatherings where few or none are being implemented.

Risk Levels

- **Do my friends and family have to wear masks and social distance at my gathering?**
You can lower — though not eliminate — risk by maintaining social distancing (staying at least 6 feet apart), wearing masks, hand washing, and other prevention behaviors. Gatherings where people are not taking these measures pose more risk than those where attendees are taking measures to slow the spread of the pandemic. Some state and local health and safety laws require mask wearing.

Given this information, PHHS has categorized traditional holiday activities into risk categories to help you and your loved ones stay as safe as possible this holiday season and beyond. Please note that the following activity risk levels are based on the current transmission levels in Boone County, MO. It is also important to remember that there is always a risk of coronavirus transmission, even when you put all of these safety measures in place.

Lower Risk Activities

- Spending the holidays with only people who live in your household.
 - To preserve holiday traditions that you normally participate in with your extended family, use video chat to connect while engaging in those activities.
 - Instead of going out on New Years Eve, dress up at home with those in your household. Don your finest attire and order takeout from your favorite restaurant.
- Baking traditional dishes for family and neighbors, especially those at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, and delivering them in a way that doesn't involve contact with others.
- Holding virtual holiday parties with coworkers.
- Sending gifts to others instead of exchanging in person.
- Shopping online from your favorite local stores or taking advantage of delivery and curbside pick-up, rather than shopping in person.
- Watching sporting events, parades, and countdowns from home.
- Viewing holiday lights and displays in your car.
- Attending virtual or remote religious ceremonies.

Moderate Risk Activities

- Having a small outdoor party with family and friends who live in your community.
 - Lower your risk by following CDC's recommendations on hosting gatherings or cook-outs.
 - Encourage guests to bring food and drinks for themselves and for members of their own household only — avoid putting out dishes and drinks where people can serve themselves

Risk Levels

Moderate Risk Activities

- Come up with a fun theme for a socially distanced New Years Eve party.
- Visiting Magic Trees while wearing a mask and staying distanced from those not in your household.
- Attending religious ceremonies in-person that follow social distancing and mask wearing protocols.
- Having pictures taken with Santa at the mall, or any other place where many people are gathering to meet Santa.

High Risk Activities

- Going shopping in crowded stores.
- Attending crowded parades or festivals.
- Gift exchanges with those not in your household. See page __ for tips on lowering risk.
- Attending large indoor parties with people from outside of your household.
 - Most New Year's Eve traditions, such as crowded parties, noisemakers, cheering at midnight, and kissing strangers, are considered high-risk activities.
- Attending religious ceremonies in-person where social distancing and mask wearing protocols are not followed.
- Using alcohol or drugs, which can cloud judgement and increase risky behavior.

Gift Exchanges

'Tis the season of White Elephants, Secret Santas, and other gift exchanges. Here are some recommendations to keep your swaps safer.

- Have no more than 10 people at a table or swapping circle, as long a social distance can be maintained.
- Choose an area where everyone can remain socially distanced throughout the exchange.
- Encourage all participants to wear a mask at all times while indoors. Designate one person to handle the gifts and pass to others. For example, during White Elephant, instead of having each person grab their gift, have one person hand the gifts out.
- Consider using low-touch or digital ways of determining the order of the swap, rather than all reaching into a hat to draw numbers, draw cards, etc.
- Have a disinfectant available to “Santa-tize” gifts in case someone wants to “steal” them.

Tips for Making the Holidays a Little Brighter

- Go all out on indoor and outdoor decorations.
- Build gingerbread houses with those in your household. Share your creations virtually with family and friends.
- Choose a holiday movie of the week and find a time when you and your family or friends who live elsewhere can watch it at the same time.
- Bake cookies for your neighbors and leave them outside their doors for contactless delivery
- If your child is unable to visit Santa, write and mail letters to send to the North Pole. And maybe one of your friends or family members can help to find a way for Santa to meet with your child virtually.

Holiday Parties

Whether a workplace party, private gathering with friends, or a New Years Eve bash, there is a lot more to consider this year than in years past. The lowest risk options for holiday parties is to gather only with those in your household, or participate virtually. For events that do not exceed the current Public Health Order, refer to the Events & Gatherings section of [The Road to Reopening: Guidance for Businesses During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). For gatherings that would exceed the current Health Order, please submit an Operational Plan. Once you have submitted it, our staff can review it and offer you more guidance if needed. The plan can be submitted through this online form: <https://forms.gle/PxGzJzTizR2vtWui7>.

Food and Drinks

There is currently no evidence that food and drink are primary methods of COVID-19 transmission. Surfaces may be contaminated with COVID-19; however this is not thought to be the main way that the virus is transmitted. Food safety practices should always be followed to reduce the risk of illness from common foodborne germs.

- Encourage guests to provide their own food and drinks and for members of their household only; avoid pot-luck or community style gatherings.
- Wear a mask when preparing food or serving food to others who are not part of your household.
- Make sure your mask is being stored properly between eating and drinking; CDC suggests storing in a dry, breathable bag (paper or mesh fabric).
- Limit entering and exiting the food preparation area when possible.
- Have one person wearing a mask serve all of the food so that utensils are not shared.
- Use single-use options or have one person serve sharable items, such as salad dressings, food containers, condiments, plates and utensils.
- All guests in attendance should follow proper hand washing procedures before and after preparing, serving, and eating food and after taking trash out. If soap and water are not readily available, use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.
 - Designate a specific space for guests to wash their hands.
- Limit crowding in spaces where food is being prepared or served by having one person dispense food. People serving should always maintain a 6 foot distance from the guests being served.
- Change and wash all linens (tablecloths, linen napkins, aprons, seating covers) immediately following the event.
- Provide contactless trash cans for guests to throw away food.
- Wash dishes with hot soapy water or in the dishwasher immediately following the event.

Travel Guidance

Travel increases the chance of getting and spreading the virus that causes COVID-19. Staying home is the best way to protect yourself and others. If you must travel, be informed of the risks involved.

Before You Travel

- Consider the mode of transportation, the dates that you'll be traveling, and assess your risk of exposure to COVID-19 while traveling.
 - Driving your own vehicle will reduce your exposure to COVID-19.
 - Be COVID Aware when visiting gas stations. It is recommended to wash or sanitize hands before and after using the gas pump, practicing social distancing at all times, and wearing a mask when entering gas stations.
 - Commercial and public transportation increases your risk of exposure to COVID-19.
 - Consider traveling during non-peak times when there will be fewer people around you.
 - Be COVID Aware when visiting airports, train/bus stations and other public transportation facilities. Wash or sanitize hands frequently, practice social distancing at all times, and wear a mask whenever you are indoors or within six feet of other people when outdoors.
- Know when to delay or cancel your travel plans.
 - Do not travel if you are sick with fever, cough, or other symptoms of COVID-19.
 - Do not travel if you have recently tested positive for COVID-19, are waiting for results of a COVID-19 test, or have had close contact in the past 14 days with a person who has tested positive or has symptoms of COVID-19.
 - If you have been asked to quarantine, delay your travel until after the full 14 days of quarantine, even if you don't have symptoms.
 - If you test positive for COVID-19 while at your destination, isolate yourself from others for a minimum of 10 days and delay your return.

After You Travel

There is always a risk of being exposed to COVID-19 on your travels. Even if you feel well and do not have any symptoms, you may be contagious and spread the virus to others. You and your travel companions (including children) pose a risk to your family, friends, and community for 14 days after you were exposed to the virus.

The CDC recommends getting tested with a viral test (also known as a PCR test, which is more effective when there are no symptoms) 1-3 days before your trip. They also suggest getting tested with a viral test 3-5 days after your trip and reduce non-essential activities for a full 7 days after travel, even if you test negative. If you don't get tested, consider reducing non-essential activities for 10 days after travel.

Travel Guidance

After You Travel

Regardless of where you traveled or what you did during your trip, take these actions to protect others from getting sick after you return:

- When around others, stay at least 6 feet from other people who are not from your household. It is important to do this everywhere, both indoors and outdoors.
- Wear a mask to keep your nose and mouth covered when you are around others who are not part of your household, whether indoors or outdoors.
- Wash your hands often or use hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol).
- Watch your health and look for [symptoms of COVID-19](#). Take your temperature if you feel sick.

Follow [state, territorial, tribal and local recommendations or requirements after travel](#).

Higher Risk Activities

Some types of travel and activities can put you at higher risk for exposure to COVID-19 (i.e. large social gatherings, sporting events, parades, being in crowded areas like an airport, etc.). If you participated in higher risk activities or think that you may have been exposed before or during your trip, take extra precautions (in addition the ones listed above) to protect others for 14 days after you arrive home:

- Stay home as much as possible.
- Avoid being around [people at increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19](#).
- Consider getting [tested](#) for COVID-19.

Overnight Guests

If you plan to have or be an overnight guest, the host and guests should communicate about what is expected ahead of time. Consider the following:

- Are those in the home or those visiting in good health? This includes older adults and individuals with medical conditions that put them at higher risk of severe illness.
- Identify a room where an individual can isolate should they develop symptoms or test positive while visiting.
- Ensure that soap and sanitizer are available and frequently clean and disinfect high touch surfaces with an EPA-approved disinfectant.
 - Disinfectant can be made at home by creating a bleach solution of 1/3 cup bleach to 1 gallon of water.
 - Refer to the [EPA's webpage](#) on Disinfectants for Coronavirus to find an approved disinfectant.
- Wear masks when together, especially when indoors and when social distance cannot be maintained.

Travel Guidance

Tips for Visiting Vulnerable Family and Friends

- It is recommended that visits to vulnerable family and friends are done so on the most limited basis possible.
- Plan the visit in advance to ensure everyone agrees on behaviors like wearing masks and social distancing.
- When visiting vulnerable family and friends, do so from a safe distance.
- Keep gatherings outside at all times, if possible.
- Encourage everyone in attendance to wear masks and keep them on for the duration of the visit.
- Limit the use of shared items. If there will be shared items, clean and disinfect them frequently.

Volunteering

The holiday season is often a time for giving back. If you plan on volunteering this holiday season, here are some tips for staying COVID Aware.

- Do not volunteer if you are sick or are quarantining due to being a close contact.
- Consider virtual volunteer options rather than volunteering in person. Or make donations in lieu of volunteering.
 - For more opportunities to donate virtually, visit www.comohelps.org. CoMoHelps is a collaborative of Boone County, City of Columbia, Community Foundation of Central Missouri, Heart of Missouri United Way, and Veterans United Foundation. CoMoHelps serves as our community's official resource for receiving and managing donations for the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - If volunteering in person, work with the organization to make sure that they have a COVID mitigation plan in place to keep all involved as safe as possible.
- Follow the COVID-19 policies and procedures of the organization you are volunteering with. For guidance on how businesses can operate during the pandemic, see [The Road to Reopening: Guidance for Businesses During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).
- Practice general hygiene and COVID precautions (handwashing, mask wearing, social distancing, ventilation, etc.)

Shopping Guidance

Customers

- Stay home if you are sick or have been exposed to COVID-19 in the last 14 days.
- Carry hand sanitizer while you're shopping and wash your hands before leaving home, and upon returning home.
- Avoid visibly large crowds where social distancing can be difficult.
- Seek out and take advantage of curbside pick-up or delivery options when available.
- Bring your own disinfectant wipes for shopping carts in case the retailer does not have any available.
- Use contactless payment methods when possible (Apple Pay, tap to pay cards; etc.)
- Plan your holiday meals in advance and gather all groceries in one trip, if possible.
 - Try to go early in order to avoid last minute crowds.
 - Utilize curbside pick-up and grocery delivery options if possible.
- Keep your face mask on at all times while shopping, including when trying on clothes in fitting rooms.

Retailers

- Encourage employees/staff to stay home if sick.
- Consider hosting sales over multiple days to reduce the number of people in the facility at one time.
- Promote online and curbside sales.
- Offer curbside pick-up and delivery options whenever possible, and promote those services.
- Frequently disinfect shopping carts, baskets, and other high touch surfaces.
- Encourage contactless payment methods when possible (Apple Pay, tap to pay cards; etc.)
- Close fitting rooms or disinfect items between individuals. Clothing should be laundered according to the manufacturer's instructions. Use the warmest appropriate water settings and dry items completely. Items such as bracelets, necklaces, etc. should be disinfected with an EPA approved disinfectant.
 - If fitting rooms are open, assign an attendant to monitor use and cleaning.
- If you are holding sales and anticipate large crowds, consider adding social distancing markers leading into the store, in and around aisles, and to the cash register.

FAQs

Can my children sit on Santa's lap if everyone wears a mask?

Sitting on Santa's lap is not recommended this year. COVID-19 most commonly spreads during close contact, such as when someone is physically near (within 6 feet) of a person with COVID-19 or has direct contact with that person. Having your child sit on Santa's lap increases the risk of spreading the virus due to the close proximity and each person talking to each other, which spreads respiratory droplets. Someone would still be considered a close contact, even if masks are worn. And given that Santa would come into contact with many, many people, he has a higher likelihood of being infected with and spreading the virus that causes COVID-19.

My workplace is having an in-person holiday party. Should I attend?

Large gatherings that are held indoors increase the risk of spreading the virus. Please see our recommendations for holiday parties above.

According to Buddy the Elf, "The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear." Should I sing loudly this year?

- Singing is considered a super-emitter of droplet transmission. We recommend that singers stand at least 10 feet apart from each other, as well as any viewers. Wear a mask, if possible. Remain outdoors while caroling and face away from other singers. If singers are sick, they should stay home.
- Consider virtual caroling. Use a video chatting platform and provide the link for viewers.
- The lowest risk option for in-person caroling is one which is limited to members of your own household.

Our traditions involve blowing out candles. Is that safe?

Wait until everyone is out of the room before blowing out candles as the act of blowing them out could cause respiratory droplets to superemit.

We want to exchange gifts with our friends and loved ones. How can we do this safely?

The best option for gift exchanges would be to do so without contact, similar to contactless delivery options where you put gifts on the front porch or outside the doorway so that there is no direct touching. If exchanging and opening gifts in person, all those involved should wear a mask and social distance from those outside their household.

Conclusion

Because we all want to be able to celebrate the holidays with our loved ones and our favorite traditions for years to come, we must take these public health measures to protect our friends, family, and community. We all have a personal responsibility to slow the spread of the pandemic and eliminate the virus as quickly as possible. Let's do what needs to be done now so that we can return to normal faster and celebrate the next holiday together.